

CONTINGENCY, NECESSITY, AND CAUSATION IN KIERKEGAARD'S THEORY OF CHANGE

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1. INTRODUCTION

One of the mysteries shrouding Kierkegaard's theory of change is the question of its philosophical breadth. Perusal through the small list of secondary writings on Kierkegaard's philosophy of change confirms that commentators correctly emphasize its existentialist value for explaining the free and qualitative transition of the coming into existence of the self.¹ One may ask, however, to what extent Kierkegaard's theory extends beyond existential considerations to considerations of pressing concern in the area of metaphysics. Metaphysical questions as they pertain to the problems of motion and change are legion, and textual evidence indicates he asked about them on some level.² Kierkegaard wrote, both pseudonymously and non-pseudonymously,

¹ One recent book on Kierkegaard's category of motion deserves mention: Claire Carlisle's *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming: Movements and Positions* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005). Carlisle deftly maneuvers through Kierkegaard's 1843 texts (*Either/Or*, *Repetition*, and *Fear and Trembling*) and picks out the significance of the nature of the movement of existential inwardness for his pseudonymous writings. She clearly delimits her investigation to clarifying the journey the self makes through the dialectical levels of inwardness, and so she does not focus attention on Kierkegaard's broader metaphysical commitments about movement. Indeed, Carlisle states that Kierkegaard's shift from wondering about the change and goings-on of the cosmos to the inner sphere of religious becoming denotes a significant movement away from the Greek (in addition to Medieval and early-Modern) program of coming to terms with the nature of motion and change (9). I concede Carlisle's point to an extent, but I believe that her strict focus on the 1843 pseudonymous texts, which all belong to what Kierkegaard in a his journals and papers (*Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, translated by Howard and Edna Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976) 6461) calls the aesthetic or 'lower' authorship is too limited. Attention to the writings of his dialectical or 'middle' texts as well as his religious or 'second' authorship reveals a far more complex picture of the role of change and motion in his thought.

² Kierkegaard is not known for having produced a metaphysic. He has given us theories of rhetoric (indirect communication), morality (especially, his ethics of love) and religion all in the service of his stated aim of leading his reader inward to attend to the difficult task of becoming a Christian. But while Kierkegaard is not known for doing or producing a metaphysic, this does not entail that he didn't have one, nor does it entail that his theories of rhetoric, morality, and religion don't require the coherence that a metaphysic might provide. Even more, the fact that Kierkegaard held quite specific Christian beliefs is evidence alone that he must have held quite specific, although perhaps not clearly articulated, metaphysical beliefs. As C. Stephen Evans argues, if Kierkegaard is doing or has a metaphysics of any kind, it is of the sort that attempts to find some kind of *holistic understanding* of ourselves in

on broad questions about the coming to be of the world, the continued existence of the world, and changes in the natural world to more specific problems that arise in our metaphysical dealings with these questions—namely, those pertaining to whether the coming into existence of the world was necessary or contingent, and whether events in nature and in our personal dealings in the world and with each other are free or necessary.³ Unfortunately, Kierkegaard did not develop answers to any one of these questions in detail. However, when one considers his scant fragments on these issues together with his more developed existential critique of Hegelianism, a metaphysical picture slowly emerges.

Kierkegaard's philosophy of change expands beyond the existential-religious project that in so many important ways illuminatingly defines his authorship. In a journal entry from 1842 or 1843, he writes that '[t]he category to which I intend to trace everything...is motion (*kinēsis*), which is perhaps one of the most difficult problems in philosophy.'⁴ A year later, he claimed in his *Philosophical Fragments* that *kinēsis* is a 'change of coming into existence.'⁵ Kierkegaard defines a change of coming into existence as a 'transition [*Overgangen*] from possibility to actuality.'⁶ Quite in-line with the Aristotelian tradition, he elaborates that 'such a being that nevertheless is a non-being is possibility, and a being that is indeed being is actual being or actuality.'⁷ Kierkegaard's definition of *kinēsis* is predominately placed in the 'Interlude' of

relation to the beliefs we hold about the world and God (See his *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006) 49. This holistic understanding should be distinguished from the claims of completeness and finality that his foes from the sectors of German Idealism sought. If Kierkegaard is doing metaphysics at all, he is not aiming at completeness, but is rather aimed at the coherency and systematic implications of belief.

³ This, of course, is not meant to be an exhaustive list of the metaphysical questions Kierkegaard posed.

⁴ Søren Kierkegaard et al., *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967) 5601. Henceforth *JP*.

⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985) 73. Henceforth *PF*.

⁶ *PF*, 74.

⁷ *Ibid*.

Philosophical Fragments.⁸ Topics in the ‘Interlude’ range from an abstruse foray into *de re* modality⁹, some logical and metaphysical problems associated with the necessity of the past and the contingency of the future and, related to the latter, issues that surround problems involving causal necessity and the outcomes of events in the natural world that are governed by laws of nature.

And while *Philosophical Fragments* takes up the problem of the possibility of historical knowledge and its relation to religious self-transformation, it is curious that Kierkegaard packages his definition and subsequent discussion of *kinēsis* in terms that go beyond this religious-existential theme, and draws a comparison between the change of coming into existence of and in the natural world with the decisive coming into existence of future-aiming human projects. Kierkegaard writes,

Everything that has come into existence is *eo ipso* historical...But the historical is the past (for the present on the border with the future has not as yet become historical); how, then can nature, although immediately present, be said to be historical?...Nature’s imperfection is that it does not have a history in another sense, and its perfection is that it nevertheless has an intimation of it (namely, that it has come into existence, which is in the past; that it exists, which is in the present)...Yet coming into existence can contain within itself a redoubling [*Fordobling*], that is, a possibility of a coming into existence within its own coming into existence. Here, in the stricter sense, is the historical, which is dialectical with respect to time. The coming into existence that here shared with the coming into existence of nature is a possibility, a possibility that for nature is its whole actuality.¹⁰

⁸ For the sake of ease of flow and simplicity, throughout this paper I will refer to Kierkegaard as the author of *Philosophical Fragments*. This has its interpretive dangers; however, unlike some claims that his pseudonym Johannes Climacus makes, in very important respects, I believe that the conclusion I draw from my treatment of the ‘Interlude’ is one Kierkegaard himself endorses in his signed authorship. This is because the author offers a theory of human and divine freedom in line with what a broadly Christian metaphysic would offer.

⁹ Kierkegaard is an essentialist in the ‘Interlude.’ His discussion of possibility and necessity does not carry merely *de dicto* significance. I agree with C. Stephen Evans (in opposition to H. A. Nielsen) that Kierkegaard is providing an, albeit not very well developed, account of the possibility and necessity of things and not merely about our statements about things. For Evans’ discussion, see his *Passionate Reason: Making Sense of Kierkegaard’s Philosophical Fragments* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992) 121-123. Henceforth *Passionate Reason*.

¹⁰ *PF*, 76.

For Kierkegaard, like the natural world, human beings have come into existence; we have undergone a transition from being possibilities to actualities, from not existing to existing. By having come into existence, we become historical. Our coming into existence points to our having a past, a past that is untouchable; it cannot be taken back. What separates us from the natural world, however, is that we humans are capable of deliberating about possible ways of existing; we are able to self-consciously actualize possibilities that have historical and personal significance for us, our families, our communities, our countries. Our initial coming into existence contains additional possibilities for existing. So, unlike the natural world, our initial coming into existence does not confine us to a natural necessity. Our future is not determined by our physical constitution or the laws of nature that govern it. So, as Kierkegaard, presses upon us, contrary to the way it is for the natural world our first coming into existence is not our only possibility.

On the whole, however, Kierkegaard defines the change of coming into existence of nature in the same way he defines the change of coming into existence of decisive human possibilities (even though, as we've just seen, these turn out to be qualitatively different sorts of changes for Kierkegaard). So, for Kierkegaard, *any and every* change of coming into existence is a transition from X existing as a possibility to X existing actually.¹¹

¹¹ The term 'transition' does not have a uniform meaning throughout his writing. If anything, his use of 'transition' is ambiguous, since the primary kinds of movement he treats throughout his authorship, namely, changes from the aesthetic to ethical and ethical to religious spheres of existence, are not actually transitions in the sense of passages or processes over time. Indeed, in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, translated by Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) (Henceforth *CUP*) Kierkegaard emphasizes numerous times that there are no direct transitions in the spheres of ethical and religious inwardness; in this way, spatial and temporal changes have no essential bearing on an individual's becoming a religious self. He writes,

It is Christianity itself that attaches an enormous importance to the individual subject; it wants to be involved with him, him alone, and thus with each one individually. It is in a way an un-Christian use of eighteen centuries to intend with them to entice the single individual into Christianity or to frighten him into it; he still does not enter into it. And if he does enter into it, he does so whether he has eighteen centuries for him or against him...*there is no direct and immediate transition to Christianity.* (*CUP*, 49)

Here, the 'transition' Kierkegaard is saying cannot be made to Christianity expressly implies a direct and continuous passage or process over time. Two thousand years of Christianity, including the historical record of Jesus of

A curious thing about the universality of this definition of motion is Kierkegaard's claim that *every* change of coming into existence refers back to a free cause of some divine or human sort. As he states, historical events, especially including momentous decisions that significantly impact one's selfhood, come 'into existence by way of a relatively freely acting cause.' And the unique series of human events, as a member of the series of all events (including natural ones) taken together, 'definitively points to an absolutely freely acting cause.'¹² Likewise, Kierkegaard claims (and I must admit without much argument at all) that *all* changes of coming into existence 'occur in freedom, not by way of necessity.'¹³ And elsewhere he remarks, 'The past has indeed come into existence; coming into existence is the change, in freedom, of becoming actuality.'¹⁴ While we should not be surprised that Kierkegaard, the great defender of existential self-transformation in Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorship, thinks the change of coming into existence of the self is free in some way (as free self-transformation is a guiding theme behind his talk of the 'leap' from and to the aesthetic, ethical, and religious spheres of existence), we should wonder about his saying the same about physical change. I believe that this claim of his is ambiguous enough to warrant further inquiry. Just what kind of freedom and necessity is Kierkegaard referring to in this passage and how do they fair in relation to each other?

My argument in this paper is that when Kierkegaard says all instances of *kinēsis* 'occur in freedom, not by way of necessity' he is pointing to the *contingent* nature of change and its

Nazareth, and a cognitive acceptance of the testimony relevant to the historical teachings of Christianity, not to mention the historical documents and doctrines of the Church, are not sufficient causal determinations for becoming a Christian. For Kierkegaard, the passage of time (and here I include events of which include both significant world historical happenings and not so significant happenings that make up history) over two millennia do not necessitate (in the sense of being causally sufficient for) one's becoming a self in faith. In contrast to transition tied to temporal passage, the movement to religious subjectivity consists of an indirect and discontinuous 'transition' distinct from external causes. As generically defined, spatio-temporal passage consists of a quantitative transition from possibility to actuality. As quantitative, these transitions can be measured, and their results can be empirically verified. Ethical and religious forms of inwardness, however, are not passages but qualitative changes or intensifications of the levels or spheres of the self.

¹² *PF*, 75-76.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *PF*, 77.

exclusion of *absolute* necessity. I show that Kierkegaard's main target is absolute necessitarianism, the view that everything is absolutely necessary. Moreover, I argue that Kierkegaard's remarks about the relationship between freedom and necessity leaves room for the possibility that he was a compatibilist, not about freedom and absolute necessity, but about freedom and some other kind of necessity.

In what follows, then, I first analyze the notion of absolute necessity that Kierkegaard juxtaposes with the change of coming into existence. Second, I consider the Hegelian backdrop to Kierkegaard's 'Interlude.' I focus on Kierkegaard's distinction between a cause and a ground of existence, and show that Hegel's favor for the latter points to an absolute necessitarianism. Third, I argue that Kierkegaard's notion of free causality is ambiguous. I attempt to provide a coherent interpretation of his view of causality that is consistent with both human choice and physical change. I conclude by suggesting a certain compatibilist interpretation of Kierkegaard's philosophy.

2. POSSIBILITY, ABSOLUTE NECESSITY, AND CONTINGENCY IN THE 'INTERLUDE'

The nature of necessity is indeed complex.¹⁵ Problems analyzing the term abound, and this is due in part to the fact that there are many kinds of necessity. Allow me to focus on the absolutely necessary in this section, and then later work out how it's distinct from other kinds of necessity. Kierkegaard has a fairly ordinary understanding of absolute necessity. By saying that the change of coming into existence does not happen necessarily, he is highlighting the widely accepted

¹⁵ Of course, a lot has been written on the nature of necessity. See Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978) (Henceforth Plantinga) for a detailed and insightful elucidation of the term. It may not be far off the mark to say that what Kierkegaard has in mind with the term 'necessity' is something like what Plantinga calls 'broadly logical necessity' (pp. 1-8). This is because, while absolute necessity includes the rules of first-order logic, and thus modus ponens, it is something much *broader* than 'strict logical necessity.' And, yet, it does not involve anything like causal or physical necessity. But it does include geometrical and mathematical truths, and the existence of God.

philosophical position (at least among contemporary philosophers) that historical (including natural) events are not absolutely or logically necessary. This doesn't tell us much about the nature of absolute necessity, though. Why the divide between contingent events and the absolutely necessary? Unlike other kinds of necessity (for example, natural necessity) the absolutely necessary is exclusive of (but does not by definition obviate) contingency. According to Kierkegaard the distinctive mark of the absolutely necessary is eternal changelessness and he contrasts the absolutely necessary with the contingency of change, defined as the transition from possibility to actuality. The absolutely necessary does not come into existence.

The following remarks made by Kierkegaard about necessity and the contingency of change are instructive at this point: (1) 'Nothing whatever exists [*er til*] because it is necessary, but the necessary exists because it is necessary or because the necessary is.'¹⁶ (2) 'Coming into existence is a change, but since the necessary is always related to itself and is related to itself in the same way, it cannot be changed at all.'¹⁷ Finally, (3) 'Everything that has come into existence is *eo ipso* historical, for even if no further historical predicate can be applied to it, the crucial predicate of the historical can still be predicated—namely, that it has come into existence.'¹⁸ The distinction between the change of coming into existence and what is absolutely necessary is marked most forcefully by the wedge Kierkegaard inserts between the timelessness of the necessary and the historical character of what comes into existence. So, for Kierkegaard, whatever exists *and* is timeless is necessary. There was no time in which it (what is necessary) could have failed or not failed to come into existence, since it does not come into existence. It just (as he says) *is*.

¹⁶ *PF*, 75.

¹⁷ *PF*, 74.

¹⁸ *PF*, 75.

We can see why what is absolutely necessary does not undergo change from doing a modal analysis of the absolutely necessary. In spite of what he says, Kierkegaard seems to think that something is absolutely necessary if and only if it cannot fail to be actual, regardless of its being known (or its being discovered) to be absolutely necessary or not. More formally, X is absolutely necessary if and only if X's being actual is X's only possibility, despite its being known to be this. This entails, as we shall see Kierkegaard argue, that whatever is absolutely necessary could not have come into existence, although, our knowledge (or discovery) of something that is absolutely necessary may be a change of coming into existence, which is *contingent*. This is because the *only* possible state of affairs for something that is absolutely necessary is an *actual* state of affairs.

The modal terms here are tricky. Kierkegaard makes an astonishing remark that may on a first look upset what I've just attributed to him. He says that '[t]he actual is no more necessary than the possible, for the necessary is absolutely different from both.'¹⁹ Kierkegaard draws a sharp divide between the necessary and both the possible and the actual, because he thinks of the latter as categories that explain the realm of becoming, whereas necessity is a category which pertains to the unchangeable of essences. If what is necessary isn't possible or actual, then what is it? Hasn't Kierkegaard contradicted himself in one breath, saying both that the necessary is and that the necessary is neither possible nor actual? Indeed, if what is necessary is not possible, then it is impossible, and so would neither be necessary nor could it exist²⁰; if it is not actual, then even if it were possible, it would not exist. But Kierkegaard says that the necessary is

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ This is why Aristotle held that the necessary is possible. As Kierkegaard was aware (see *PF*, p. 75), Aristotle (in *On Interpretation* 21b-23; also see *PF*, 299 fn 13) argued that there are different senses of the possible—that which is not impossible and that which may or may not be actual. As I show later on, Kierkegaard, for some reason, thinks this confuses the issue with the possible. His usage of the possible suggests his favoring the use of the possible as that which is contingent, as that which may or may fail to be instead of that which is not impossible.

something that cannot fail to exist—it doesn't come into existence and it doesn't go out of existence, it simply is.

We may be able to sidestep these problems with one very simple reading of this passage. Under closer inspection, we can see that Kierkegaard in fact is not stating that the necessary is neither possible nor actual. Rather, perhaps he means that the possible and the actual in the sense in which he has defined them for his purposes of explaining change are not necessary. That is, if he uses the term 'possibility' to mean that which may be (and thus may also fail to be) actual, then he is right that the possible is not necessary, since the necessary is something that cannot fail to be. Furthermore, if by the term 'actual' he means that which has come into existence, has a past, and is present, then it too is not necessary given how he defines it. This lends insight to Kierkegaard's odd remark that '[t]he change of coming into existence is actuality.' For this reason, he continues, '[n]o coming into existence is necessary—not before it came into existence, for then it cannot come into existence, and not after it has come into existence, for then it has not come into existence.'²¹ On a first look, then, this seems to work. The possible and the actual, *as such*, are not necessary. Indeed, there are many possibilities that are not absolutely necessary. For example, my sitting at a café writing this right now is not, on most interpretations, absolutely necessary. Perhaps, then, Kierkegaard is not after all stating that the necessary is neither possible nor actual. Instead he may just be pointing out what logically follows from the manner he has employed these categories up to now.

Unfortunately, some authors just don't want to be read simply. Kierkegaard is one of them. While he is right that the possible and the actual are not necessary as such, he turns right around and asserts that 'the possible cannot be predicated of the necessary.'²² Now we're back to

²¹ *PF*, 75.

²² *Ibid.*

square one, and the problems re-emerge. There is one sense, just discussed in the foregoing, in which the 'possible' cannot be said of the necessary. As defined, the necessary is that which cannot fail to be. It doesn't come into existence nor does it go out of existence, whereas the possible is that which either may be or may fail to be. It's false, then, to say that the necessary is possible *in this sense*.

Kierkegaard's problem, however, has not yet been curbed. The root of it comes down to his bluntly refusing to consider *different senses* of the possible. He writes that this was precisely Aristotle's mistake, 'to begin with the thesis that everything necessary is possible,' and that 'he [Aristotle] makes shift of formulating two kinds of the possible instead of discovering' that the possible cannot be said of the necessary.²³ This is a mistake. But as long as we pay attention to the context of the passage, I believe some reasonable interpretive headway can be made, this in spite of the problems surrounding Kierkegaard's notion of possibility.

First, the Aristotelian doctrine of the different senses of possibility that Kierkegaard finds problematic is based on the distinction between the impossible and the possible. Something that is impossible is that which cannot be. There are no impossible states of affairs. There are at least two ways to think of impossibility: (1) absolute impossibility and (2) natural or physical impossibility.²⁴ Something that is absolutely impossible is, quite simply, that which *by definition* cannot be made actual. For example, my squaring a circle and my adding 2 and 2 to make 5 are absolutely impossible. However, natural or physical impossibilities are not absolutely impossible. Thus, natural impossibilities are *not* by definition impossible. Rather, given some set of antecedent conditions and causes along with the laws of nature, some things are physically impossible for us to do. Like cows, I cannot jump over the moon, and unlike Superman I cannot

²³ *PF*, 75.

²⁴ My discussion of the two senses of impossibility is drawn from Plantinga, 10-15.

run faster than a speeding bullet. Why not call these amazing physical feats absolutely impossible? The simple answer is we can imagine them to be possible, as far fetched as that sounds, while we can't do this with squaring circles. The coming into existence of the world and the laws of nature that govern the world could have been different even though the actual laws of nature prevent such activities. The absolutely impossible, then, is the stronger form of impossibility than the naturally impossible. This is because the naturally impossible is so contingently, whereas the absolutely impossible is impossible by definition.

As we might have expected, the opposite of the impossible is the possible. The possible, as we have already seen it employed, is something that *can* be. This is the general way Kierkegaard employs the notion of possibility. For something to become actual it must *be able* to be actual. While I can't jump over the moon, I can get on a spaceship and fly there (although, right now, that might be very difficult). For now let us consider, as Aristotle did, two broad senses of possibility: (1) the contingent and (2) the absolutely necessary. These are two ways of being possible because what is contingent and what is absolutely necessary both *can be* actual. The contingent is distinguished from the absolutely necessary in that it may fail to be, whereas the absolutely necessary cannot fail to be.

The contingent is what both may be or may fail to be. My writing this right now at the café is possible in this sense. I'm here, so I *can* be here, and yet, equally, I could have failed to be here. I could have been at the office with a student or have been caught in traffic. This sense of the possible as what *both* may be *and* may fail to be captures what Kierkegaard primarily means by the possible. This is the possible *as* contingent, which is categorically different from the absolutely necessary.

From his remarks, then, we see that Kierkegaard sharply distinguishes between the contingent and the absolutely necessary, but he does not follow Aristotle by attributing a different sense of possibility to the absolutely necessary. From the Aristotelian point of view, both the contingent and the absolutely necessary are not impossible: things, events, propositions, states of affairs, etc. that are one or the other of these *can be*. In other words, quite simply what is possible is not impossible. But we see, again, the apparent mistake Kierkegaard has made by not allowing the possible to be predicated of the absolutely necessary: since something is either possible or impossible, it follows that the absolutely necessary is impossible

If we pressed Kierkegaard on this we could ask whether he'd be willing to say that the necessary is impossible. From a glance, this seems to be what follows from his remarks. But my hunch is that he wouldn't be willing to do so. So, for what it's worth, he simply cannot mean this, and so he must be employing possibility in a very specific way that excludes any notion of absolute necessity. That is, he must mean that the sub-genus of possibility—the contingent—cannot be predicated of the absolutely necessary. We ought to extend a charitable hand to Kierkegaard, and I think he would reach for it. If we keep in mind his division between the absolutely necessary and the contingency of change, a coherent picture of what he's saying about how necessity and possibility are related appears. Let's look at what he says.

The context of these passages pinpoints Kierkegaard's distinction between the absolutely necessary and the possible and actual as terms that define the nature of change. Recall that change is a transition from possibility to actuality, 'from not existing to existing.'²⁵ And as I've already mentioned, he thinks of the possible and actual in a fairly Aristotelian way: '[t]he possible is a being that is nevertheless non-being, and a being that is indeed being is actual

²⁵ *PF*, 73.

being.’²⁶ Change is from something being in a state of non-being to an actual state of being. For example, one kind of change may involve God’s actualizing an idea, say the idea of a series of natural events. The series of events exist in the mind of God, but the ideal series’ mode of being is as a non-being. God’s realization of the idea brings it into actuality.

The definition of change as the transition from something being possible to its being actual is further outlined with a key remark: change ‘is not in essence [*Væsen*] but in being [*Væren*].’²⁷ This demands some unpacking to see the importance of what Kierkegaard is saying about change at this point. It’s important to see that changes are events in or of *existence* and not in some realm of *essences*. Change is from one mode of existence (not existing) to another mode of existence (existing) of a *single* thing; not from one kind of thing to a different *kind* of thing. Take, for example, the change of some possible series of events that exists in God’s mind. The change is from a possible series to an actual series. The possible series, say the one that contains me writing this at a café right now has been put into actuality. However, this change from possible series to actual series is the change of the existence of one and the same series in God’s mind. That is, by becoming actual the possible series is not ‘intrinsically changed.’²⁸ The content of the idea in God’s mind remains the same through its coming into existence. Otherwise, it wouldn’t be the particular idea in God’s mind in question, but another idea that comes into existence.²⁹ In other words, what is possible does not become something absolutely different from itself when it is actualized, but rather becomes something *relatively* different in that it’s *mode of existence* is changed. Change, in other words, is the transference of one mode of

²⁶ *PF*, 74.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

existence of something (not-existing) to another mode of existence (actually existing). This is why, then, Kierkegaard argues that change is *of the existence* or *being* of a thing.

What, on the flipside, is he ruling out by saying that the change of coming into existence is not in essence? What could he mean here? I think Kierkegaard is pointing out that change is not something that happens among, in, or between ‘essences’ like redness, horseness, humanness, or triangelness. The essence of red does not become more or less red than it is. A perfect isosceles triangle cannot become a triangle with an 89.9999° degree angle, nor does it become a square. Change in these ways would involve a transition *from one kind* of thing to another *kind* of thing, from one essence to another. The realm of essences is unchanging. Possibilities whose mode of being is non-being, on the other hand, do change; they can become actual.

In addition, then, to the possible being something that may equally be or fail to be, the mode of existence of the possible is also ‘non-being’ or ‘not-existing.’ For this reason it seems strange to say that the necessary can be predicated of the possible. How can the absolutely necessary, something that cannot fail to be actual, also be in some sense a non-being? This is a self-contradiction. So, on this reading, Kierkegaard is right: the necessary is not possible. It remains controversial, though, that he refuses to expand the notion of the possible to include that which is not impossible, as Aristotle did.

This gloss on absolute necessity narrows the scope of the kinds of necessity Kierkegaard juxtaposes with the historical and contingent change of coming into existence. What is immediately clear is that the features he ascribes to necessity here are not reducible to those

shared by physical or natural necessity.³⁰ The absolutely necessary is that which cannot fail to be, whereas what is possible can equally be or fail to be actual. There is, then, for Kierkegaard, a deep rift between absolute necessity and the possible and the actual. However, the same is not the case with natural necessity. As I argued, one significant difference between absolute necessity and necessity in nature is that we can not only imagine the laws of nature that govern the universe to be different, but it is also possible that the actual series of events governed by actual laws of nature could have been different.³¹ But this is not true of the absolutely necessary. The absolutely necessary cannot fail to be actual—i.e. the transition from its being possible to its being actual is impossible, as this would result in the self-contradiction that at some time what is absolutely necessary wasn't absolutely necessary.

What kinds of things are absolutely necessary? Kierkegaard on this score is not instructive. However, and as C. Stephen Evans argues, something bordering on Platonic Forms may be what Kierkegaard has in mind here.³² This is seen in his insistence that ideas are metaphysically distinct from any temporal instance of them. His critique of Hegelian dialectical logic in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* suggests that it is a mistake to think that the most basic logical and metaphysical entities (e.g. those that make up Hegel's *Science of Logic*: being, quantity, quality, form, content, reality, identity, difference, etc.) are themselves in a process of becoming. This, he says, 'simply confuses logic. It is indeed curious to make movement the basis in a sphere in which movement is inconceivable or to have movement explain logic, whereas logic cannot explain movement.'³³ This repeats Kierkegaard's argument that change does not

³⁰ For a helpful analysis of the relevant differences between natural and absolute necessity, see Earl Conee and Theodore Sider, *Riddles of Existence: a Guided Tour of Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 181-196. Henceforth *Riddles*

³¹ *Riddles*, 190.

³² C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript: The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1983) 61. Henceforth Evans.

³³ *CUP*, 109-110

occur in the realm of essences but rather, being a transition from possibility to actuality, is from not-existing to existing. In this way, change is contingent.

His argument for the changelessness of absolute necessity further illuminates its relation to essences. He claims that ‘Necessity...pertains to essence and in such a way that the qualification of essence specifically excludes coming into existence.’³⁴ As we saw Kierkegaard argue, essences don’t come into existence, nor do they change from what they are to something different. Now, Kierkegaard doesn’t tell us what exactly these necessary essences are, but his argument for the separation of absolute necessity and the contingent character of change does not require his doing so. It is enough, if this general Platonic line of interpretation is correct, for him to highlight the difference between the changelessness of necessary ideas and the contingency of change.³⁵

3. HEGEL AND ABSOLUTE NECESSITARIANISM

We’ve seen Kierkegaard argue for a sharp distinction between contingency and absolute necessity in the ‘Interlude.’ What’s important to see is that, for Kierkegaard, the absolutely necessary while distinct from contingency, does not obviate it. That is, it does not render contingency impossible. So, Kierkegaard is in line with the majority of philosophers by distinguishing between contingency and absolute necessity. Change is contingent and is not absolutely necessary, so nothing comes into existence necessarily. We might wonder why, if Kierkegaard is on board with such a common philosophical distinction, we would stress it. The

³⁴ *PF*, 86.

³⁵ In addition to ascribing absolute necessity to broad metaphysical concepts, Kierkegaard might be willing to add to the list of the absolutely necessary strictly logical and self-evident propositions (bachelors are unmarried men, a thing is either green or non-green), logical rules of inference (e.g. modus ponens), geometrical theorems (like Pythagoras’s), numerical properties and their relations (that the number 10 is larger than the number 5, or that the number 10 is necessarily a prime number, for example), and the existence of God (for example, that God is a necessary being).

reason is that the philosophical climate in Denmark and throughout Europe during Kierkegaard's time was decidedly Hegelian, and Hegel himself was interpreted by some to have canceled the distinction between the contingent and the absolutely necessary. Kierkegaard, I believe, was one of these philosophers. He could not see how something's coming into existence was absolutely necessary. The main protagonist in the 'Interlude,' then appears to ascribe absolute necessity to *everything*. This is the view of absolute necessitarianism, a strong form of determinism. The position is that there is *nothing* (no historical or natural event, no state of affairs, etc.) that is not *absolutely* necessary in the logical sense delineated in the foregoing; that is, there is nothing that is actual that could have been otherwise than it is, that could have failed to be.

The kind of absolute necessitarianism Kierkegaard is worried about is characterized by Frederick Beiser as an absolute idealist version of panlogicism. Panlogicism is the view that everything that happens (including changes of coming into existence) happens of necessity, according to the governance of reason.³⁶ Under this panlogistic view of coming into existence, every historical (and thus contingent for Kierkegaard) event is absolutely necessary. As Beiser explains, panlogicism is the view that the actual world is absolutely necessary because it follows with necessity from the divine nature. In this way, changes of the coming into existence of nature and of the self are necessary because their coming into existence could not have been otherwise. So, the panlogisticist does not endorse a relatively weak determinism that states that events are necessary *on the condition* that certain antecedent factors obtain. Rather, the panlogisticist holds a much stronger position: historical events are necessary in the sense that their occurrence could not have been otherwise, full stop. The view is that the actual series of events that occurs is the only possible series.

³⁶ See Frederick Beiser, *Hegel* (New York: Routledge, 2005) 76 and 319. Henceforth Beiser.

I'd like to turn then to Hegel's absolute necessitarianism.³⁷ While absolute necessitarianism is a species of absolute necessity, it is a far stronger position than a run of the mill theory about broad logical necessity. There are fairly intuitive philosophical views about absolute necessity that do not obviate contingency or free will. Kierkegaard's broad Platonic view about absolute necessity is, as I have shown, one of these more ordinary ones. Kierkegaard, however, saw absolute necessitarianism counter-intuitive, philosophically incoherent, and existentially insidious. He believed it disposes of the contingency required for free and responsible action. While I don't have space here to develop his existentialist worries with necessitarianism, it does happen to be a predominate thread of concern throughout his aesthetic and religious writings.³⁸

As I have already mentioned, in the 'Interlude' Kierkegaard argues that coming into existence is the result of some act of freedom. Each change points back to some free cause or other. So, in addition to contingency being a necessary condition for change, change must also be freely caused, *at least* at the origin of a series of events.³⁹ This explains why Kierkegaard asserts that '[n]othing coming into existence comes into existence by way of a ground, but everything by way of a cause.'⁴⁰ Kierkegaard was not one to regularly illuminate issues with references. He

³⁷ I am very much aware that calling Hegel an absolute necessitarian is controversial, and defending or critiquing Kierkegaard's interpretation of Hegel is far beyond the purpose of this paper. There is some convincing evidence that Kierkegaard did not have much first-hand knowledge of Hegel's writings, gaining his understanding of Hegel's thought from his Danish contemporaries, F. A. Trendelenburg, and Schelling. For an excellent, yet controversial, work on Kierkegaard's familiarity with Hegel and Hegelianism, see Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Stewart argues that much of Kierkegaard's criticisms normally thought to be aimed at Hegel are actually targeted at popular purveyors of Hegel in Copenhagen. That said, if Kierkegaard indeed believed Hegel to be an absolute necessitarian and either Hegel did in fact think that everything that comes into existence is absolutely necessary or this follows from his system, then I think Kierkegaard has rather interesting philosophical grounds to reject Hegel's view of necessity.

³⁸ For an insightful treatment of the way Kierkegaard worried about the way the philosophical view of absolute necessitarianism impacts individual existence, see Michelle Kosch, 'Despair in Either/Or,' *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 44.1 (2006) 85-97. Also, see Julia Watkin's 'The Idea of Fate in Kierkegaard's Thought,' *Kierkegaard and Freedom*, edited by James Giles (New York: Palgrave, 2000) 105-120.

³⁹ I will explain Kierkegaard's theory of free causation in more detail later in the paper.

⁴⁰ *PF*, 75.

gives us a hint, though, that his position is to be juxtaposed with a broadly speculative philosophical account of coming to be.⁴¹ This we can see by his somewhat confusing reference to a ‘ground’ of coming into existence in distinction from a ‘cause’ of coming into existence. While Kierkegaard does not name Hegel as the holder of the view that all coming into existence happens by way of a ground, we can reasonably, I think, assume that Hegel’s view is in the background here.⁴² The notion of ‘ground’ can be traced back to Hegel’s *Encyclopaedia Logic*,

⁴¹ This interpretation may ring controversial to some. See Arnold B. Come, *Trendelenburg's Influence on Kierkegaard's Modal Categories* (Montreal, Canada: Inter Editions, 1991). Come argues that Kierkegaard is ‘clearly’ referring to F. A. Trendelenburg’s concept of ground in *Logische Untersuchungen*, and not Hegel’s own notion of ground. There may be some truth to this, especially because Kierkegaard was reading Trendelenburg’s works during the time he wrote *Philosophical Fragments*. But, it seems to me that what Come argues Kierkegaard rejects in Trendelenburg’s concept of ground could easily be applied to Hegel. Come writes that ‘And it is Trendelenburg’s concept of ‘ground-of-knowing,’ as the ‘purpose’ on which depends (by necessity) the effecting cause and in turn the form and matter shaped by the cause, which Kierkegaard is rejecting as explanatory of that transition from possibility to actuality which is called ‘coming-into-existence’. For Kierkegaard, the freely effecting cause that accounts for this transition is outside the web of Trendelenburg’s ultimate and unifying ‘ground’” (53). Even if Kierkegaard intended to criticize Trendelenburg here, his critique could be extended to Hegel in that Hegel’s concept of ground serves almost the same purpose as Trendelenburg’s. As a principle of sufficient reason, Hegel’s notion of ground is the necessary explanation for every efficient cause. In addition, prior to Kierkegaard’s discussion of cause and ground, he clearly refers to Hegel’s claim that necessity is the unity of possibility and actuality. As such, Hegel is certainly in the background of these early pages of the ‘Interlude.’

⁴² In addition, Kierkegaard’s analysis of the nature of possibility, actuality, and necessity in the ‘Interlude,’ as I have alluded, is directed at Hegel’s argument that necessity is the negation of the negation of possibility—that is, the unity of possibility and actuality—in the section, titled, ‘Actuality’ in ‘The Doctrine of Essence.’ Cf. *PF*, 74; G. W. F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, translated by T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, H. S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1991) § 147 (henceforth *Encyclopaedia*); also cf. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, translated by A. V. Miller (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1999) 546-553 (henceforth *Science of Logic*). Moreover, in a helpful endnote to the passage in question, the Hongs point out that Kierkegaard was familiar with Hegel’s doctrine of essence (*PF*, 301). In an 1842 or 1843 entry in his reading journal, Kierkegaard jotted down a detailed outline of the second subdivision of the Logic. Both the structure and the content of the outline mirror the set-up of ‘The Doctrine of Essence.’ It reads:

- A.
- Essence as Ground of Existence
- (a) The Primary Characteristics or Categories of Existence
 - (a) Identity (b) Difference (g) Ground
 - (b) Existence
 - (c) The Thing
- B.
- Appearance
- (a) The World of Appearance or Phenomenal World
 - (b) Content and Form
 - (c) Ratio (Relation)
- C.
- Actuality

where, in the second subdivision of the logic—'The Doctrine of Essence'—he argues that existence emerges from *the* ground.⁴³ Ground is linked up with Hegel's absolute idealism in that it provides an absolute and sufficient reason for the coming into existence of things.

What is Hegel's doctrine of ground and why does Kierkegaard think it is problematic? Roughly, Hegel's doctrine of ground is that everything has a sufficient reason for why it exists. The sufficient reason for something's existence is the ground of that thing's existence. This is Hegel's version of the principle of sufficient reason. Simply, nothing is without a reason; everything has a cause of a sufficient sort.

Hegel's notion of the ground of existence is at odds with Kierkegaard's emphasis on the contingency of the change of coming into existence. We see this in Kierkegaard's fragmentary yet approving reference to Leibniz's notion of possible worlds. Leibniz's theory of possible worlds involves God's choosing to actualize a world from multiple possible worlds. On the basis of the notion of possible worlds, Kierkegaard argues that neither divine foreknowledge of the future nor the fact that the past is certain, and thus irrevocable, confers absolute necessity to the future.

[F]oreknowledge of the future does not confer necessity upon it (Boethius)...[and]...the basis of the certainty of the past is the uncertainty regarding it in the same sense as there is uncertainty regarding the future, the possibility (Leibniz—possible worlds), out of which it could not possibly come forth with necessity, *nam necessarium se ipso prius sit, necessee est* [for it is necessary that necessity precede itself]⁴⁴

On the one hand, divine foreknowledge of the future does not take away future contingency.

That God knows that some event will occur in the future does not mean that the event is absolutely necessary. As Kierkegaard suggests, future contingents are future events that are

Because of Kierkegaard's familiarity with Hegel's account of existence and ground, and because he was engaging these topics around the time of his writing *Philosophical Fragments*, I think we are right to point to Hegel's doctrine of ground as Kierkegaard's foil in the above passage.

⁴³ Cf., for example, *Encyclopaedia*, § 121 and *Science of Logic*, 444-478.

⁴⁴ *PF*, p. 80.

among many events in a possible world that God chooses to actualize. If God *chooses* to actualize one world over another, then the world he actualizes is just as possible as the one he doesn't. Both may be or may fail to be, and so neither is absolutely necessary.

Thus, a series of past events and future events is contingent, this in spite of the fact that the past is 'certain.' As Kierkegaard explains, the certainty of the past, the fact that it came into existence and cannot be revoked, is based on its 'uncertain' character—its contingency—which it has in virtue of having come into existence. The future shares this uncertainty with the past, since future events are members of the *possible* world that God actualizes.

There are two core ideas central to the theory of possible worlds that are odds with Hegel's notion of the ground of existence. First, all possible worlds are possible in the sense that they are contingent. That is, each and every world God deliberates about may be or may fail to be. None are absolutely necessary. Second, in the Leibnizian view of possible worlds (and Kierkegaard endorses this view in key respects) God transcends the causal series he actualizes. God is not a member of the series, but is the absolute *cause* of the series.

This is *not* the case with Hegel's theory of coming into existence. The ground, for Hegel, is purely *immanent* and *necessary* to coming into existence. The ground of coming into existence is, in the end, the immanent unfolding of Spirit or God as it marks its course through history.⁴⁵ In this way, God is not separate from the world, but is the immanent ground of the world's coming to be, the sole reason for the coming into existence of the world, including both nature and the human world (culture and its institutions).

What makes the immanent self-unfolding of Spirit necessary? In other words, why does this view of Spirit entail that all coming into existence (in short, everything that happens) is

⁴⁵ 'In the end,' because at the point of the *Encyclopaedia Logic* where the discussion of ground is raised, the Notion is not yet posited as what it is: the true in and for itself.

absolutely necessarily? Apart from the places where Hegel actually seems to imply it, this particular view of necessity naturally follows from two important premises that are central to Hegel's brand of idealist metaphysics. Frederick Beiser details these two premises as follows:

- (1) The Absolute, or God, or Spirit, exists from the necessity of its own nature
- (2) The Absolute, or God, or Spirit is all reality.⁴⁶

As Beiser explains, attributing both of these premises to Hegel is unproblematic, since they are core doctrines that undergird his metaphysics. Premise (1) asserts that God is *causa sui*; God, according to Hegel, is a necessary being. Premise (2) expresses Hegel's monism. It argues that God is the only thing there is. There is nothing outside of God's reach. If God is all reality, then there is 'nothing outside itself to limit it.'⁴⁷

We can see how these two premises lay the foundation for the view that coming into existence is absolutely and logically necessary. Let's look more closely at the contours of this argument. If God exists from the necessity of its own nature, then God is a necessary being and so is not contingent. This is philosophically uncontroversial. The controversial premise, however, is that God is *all* reality (that is, anything, if it is, is God). The argument concludes that all of reality, which includes all that exists and will exist, is necessary.⁴⁸

If all of reality is necessary, then the question is whether contingency is found in Hegel's system. The problem is that if there is really contingency for Hegel, then it would have to exist *outside* of the Absolute. But if it's outside of the Absolute, then the Absolute is limited, and in this way is not all reality. Kierkegaard saw this problem in Hegel. He humorously points out:

⁴⁶ Cf. Beiser, 76.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ As Beiser points out, there are a number of detractors from this view of Hegel. Cf. Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975) 94; George di Giovanni, 'The Category of Contingency in the Hegelian Logic,' in *History and System: Hegel's Philosophy of History*, edited by Robert Perkins (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993) 41-59.

A thinker erects a huge building, a system, a system embracing the whole of existence, world history, etc., and if his personal life is considered, to our amazement the appalling and ludicrous discovery is made that he himself does not personally live in this huge, domed palace but in a shed alongside it, or in a doghouse, or at best in the janitor's quarters.⁴⁹

It's unclear whether one should take this as a serious argument against Hegel's idealism, but the point is well taken. The particularity of one's personal life—one's desires, longings, loves, and so forth—fall outside the reaches of the immanent whole. The question is whether the particularity of personal life is really contingent or just seemingly contingent. It is certain that Kierkegaard takes them to be really contingent, given that a necessary system cannot admit contingency. If particularity is really contingent, then it has actual status in spite of Absolute Spirit's self-development. Something that has real status in spite of Spirit's necessary development exists outside of that development. Therefore, and here is the 'appalling and ludicrous discovery,' the particularity of personal life falls outside the grasp of Spirit's self-development.

So, in Hegel's system, everything that exists necessarily exists and every event necessarily occurs; otherwise, Spirit's self-development wouldn't be necessary. But, not just that. Under Kierkegaard's understanding, Hegel's doctrine of ground is committed to the view that everything that exists or every event that occurs happens of necessity *according to reason*. If everything happens of necessity according to reason, then everything that exists, for Hegel, is *logically necessary*.⁵⁰ This is, *prima facie*, a hard position to accept, especially since it seems to

⁴⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, translated by Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) 43. Henceforth *SUD*.

⁵⁰ Hegel roughly speaks in this way. In the *Encyclopaedia Logic*, he states, 'When we say that the world is governed by Providence, this implies that, being predetermined in and for itself, purpose is what is at work generally, so that what is to come corresponds to what was previously known and willed. In any case, the interpretation of the world as determined by necessity, and the faith in a divine Providence, do not have to be considered reciprocally exclusive at all. *What underlies the divine Providence at the level of thought will soon prove to be the Concept. The Concept is the truth of necessity and contains the latter sublated within itself, just as, conversely, necessity is implicitly the Concept*' (222—emphasis mine). In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, Hegel argues, 'The sole aim of

fly in the face of some of our basic intuitions about freedom. In addition, it's a completely puzzling notion. It seems to deny the existence of natural and historical contingency altogether. Indeed, the classical distinction between contingent and necessary truths appears blurred here.⁵¹ It is a contingent truth that I'm sitting at my desk writing at this moment, whereas it's a necessary truth that 'the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the square of the two sides.'⁵² One mark of a contingent truth is that it could have been otherwise—it could have been false that I'm currently sitting at my desk typing. The mark of a necessary truth is that it cannot be false.

We've seen that Hegel's God/Spirit is *causa sui*, that it exists from the necessity of its own nature. Minimally, this means that Spirit is absolutely necessary. We've also noticed Hegel argue that God is all reality. Yet, as Spirit unfolds through history, particularity and contingency—existence itself—emerge out of Spirit in virtue of the nature of Spirit itself. But as Beiser has rightly pointed out, it is difficult to explain how what is in itself absolutely necessary can become contingent.⁵³ It is, on the face of it, contradictory to say that something can be both absolutely necessary and contingent, this because, as Kierkegaard have shown, what is absolutely necessary cannot be otherwise than itself, whereas what is contingent can.

philosophical enquiry is to eliminate the contingent. Contingency is the same as external necessity, that is, a necessity which originates in causes which are themselves no more than external circumstances. In history, we must look for a general design, the ultimate end of the world, and not a particular end of the subjective spirit or mind; and we must comprehend by means of reason, which cannot concern itself with particular and finite ends, but only with the absolute...The rational is that which has being in and for itself, and from which everything else derives its value. It assumes varying shapes; but in none of them is it more obviously an end than in that whereby the spirit explicates and manifests itself in the endlessly varying forms which we call nations. We must bring to history the belief and conviction that the realm of the will is not at the mercy of contingency. That world history is governed by an ultimate design, that it is a rational process—whose rationality is not that of a particular subject, but a divine and absolute reason...' G. W. F Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, translated by H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) 28.

⁵¹ Leibniz draws the distinction in this way: 'There are also two kinds of truth: those of reasoning, and those of fact. Truths of reasoning are necessary, and their opposite is impossible; those of fact are contingent, and the opposite is possible. When a truth is necessary, the reason for it can be found in analysis, by resolving it into simpler ideas and truths until we arrive at the basic ones.' G. W. Leibniz, *Monadology, Philosophical Texts*, translated by R. S. Woolhouse and Richard Francks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) § 33.

⁵² David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 108.

⁵³ Beiser, 77.

In the context of Hegelianism, the coming-to-be of anything—that is, any and every event that is merely natural or historical—is logically, and thus, absolutely necessary. We would, of course, be wrong to identify what is here being termed ‘logically necessary’ with what we normally understand by logically necessary, this because it is difficult to see how a historical event, say, that I ate multi-grain Cheerios this morning, is logically necessary. Philosophers understand something to be logically necessary when its opposite is impossible, like a necessary truth. For example, ‘If all humans are mortal, and Socrates is a human, then Socrates is mortal,’ and ‘A triangle has three sides’ are necessary truths. One feature that necessary truths share is that they are true regardless of any actual or imagined circumstance.

Yet, historical events that have come into existence do not seem to share this feature with necessary truths. Most would agree that they are *contingently* wrought, and that past events are only contingently true. But, Hegel’s rationalism conceives historical events as rationally unfolding and necessarily connected to each other, and not just *causally* connected, but logically connected.

4. FREE CAUSALITY, NATURAL NECESSITY, AND THE SCOPE OF CONTINGENCY

Thus far we have looked at the notions of absolute necessity and contingency and have considered a broad picture of absolute necessitarianism in Hegel’s metaphysics. Our foray into Hegel was spawned by Kierkegaard’s statement that changes of coming into existence are not absolutely necessary. I’ve also alluded to Kierkegaard’s claim that all changes of coming into existence occur in freedom *and* that change is an effect of a cause. If all coming into existence

occurs in freedom and is an effect of a cause, then, Kierkegaard argues, all coming into existence is an effect of a freely acting cause.⁵⁴

The question to ask at this juncture is whether Kierkegaard is right that all change refers back to a freely acting cause, or at least whether his position is coherent. We may be quick to reject Hegel's view of absolute necessity as enumerated, but should we be so inclined to accept Kierkegaard's view about free causality just as quickly? There is intuitive appeal in the view that our important endeavors are freely caused, that we are the cause of some of the most important changes we undergo and that there is nothing prior determining our actions. Kierkegaard is happy to appeal to this intuition.

However, as I've pointed out, Kierkegaard argues that *all* changes of coming into existence refer back to a free cause of some divine or human sort. Given that he defines change in broad enough terms to include natural changes, what view of free causality could he be endorsing? Events that occur in nature, like the coming to be of plants and animals, or just the generic movement of bodies, involve a complex system of cause and effect, in addition to natural laws that govern these changes.

Perhaps Kierkegaard would find our question problematic because it invokes a false dichotomy between freedom and necessity. Kierkegaard might say, 'One can affirm both that all coming into existence happens by way of a freely acting cause, *and* that some events are necessary in some way. So, freedom and necessity *as such* are not absolutely different from each other.' I contend that this is something like Kierkegaard's understanding of the relationship between freedom and necessity. At this point, however, it isn't clear what the details of his view are. Let's consider the following argument from the 'Interlude':

⁵⁴ Cf. *PF*, 75.

Every cause ends in a freely acting cause. The intervening causes are misleading in that the coming into existence appears to be necessary; the truth about them is that they, as having themselves come into existence, definitively point to a freely acting cause. As soon as coming into existence is definitively reflected upon, even an inference from natural law is not evidence of the necessity of any coming into existence. So also with manifestations of freedom, as soon as one refuses to be deceived by its manifestations but reflects on its coming into existence.⁵⁵

There is much happening in this passage; it will take some time to unpack. The question before us is how Kierkegaard can argue that all changes of coming into existence point to a freely acting cause. Doesn't this rule out the view that there are some events that are necessary? The short and simple answer is no. However, his account is far from simple. By arguing that coming into existence refers back to a free cause, Kierkegaard underscores the idea that coming into existence is not absolutely necessary; but the jury is still out on how free causality and other kinds of necessity fair together. I think Kierkegaard is appealing to two senses of necessity in the above passage, although he does not clearly develop them. On the one hand, the notion of absolute necessity is again juxtaposed with the change of coming into existence. Nothing, he argues, comes into existence necessarily, and if coming into existence is not absolutely necessary, then it must be an effect of a free cause.

On the other hand, Kierkegaard introduces—albeit ambiguously—the notion of causal or natural necessity; this is evident from his remark about a causal series of events in the world coupled with laws of nature that govern it. He further maintains that this causal series contains intervening causes, and that the coming into existence of these and their effects is a sign that they point back to a free cause. I take this to mean, as I will explain in just a moment, that the series of causes is not absolutely determined to come into existence, even though some intervening causes in the series are causally necessary. This is due to Kierkegaard's earlier argument that whatever comes into existence is contingent. If it is not contingent, then it would be absolutely

⁵⁵ *PF*, 75.

necessary. But if it were absolutely necessary, then it could not have come into existence in the first place.

The foregoing interpretation of the passage in question makes sense of Kierkegaard's stronger claim that, while they appear to, these intervening causes do not offer proof that their coming into existence was absolutely necessary. Why might one, on the basis of observance, think that a chain of causes and their effects proves that they are absolutely necessary? One reasonable response is that these events *are* necessary. They appear to come into existence necessarily because their coming into existence is in fact necessary. Of course, appearances can be misleading. The overriding assumption here is that all changes of coming into existence are contingent. Even if a sequence of events appears necessary to us, for Kierkegaard the reality of the situation is that they are contingent. If they are contingent, then they can't be proven to be absolutely necessary. Thus, C. Stephan Evans remarks in his commentary on this passage that 'If an event is in itself not necessary, it is impossible to demonstrate its necessity.'⁵⁶ Following others before him (e.g. Leibniz and Lessing), Kierkegaard concludes the passage by arguing that what is contingent cannot be the basis for a logical demonstration of what is absolutely necessary.⁵⁷ That the sequence of causes and their effects came into existence (which even Hegel wouldn't deny) precludes the possibility of its being shown to be absolutely necessary.

⁵⁶ Evans, 261.

⁵⁷ This is the central argument of the third thesis Kierkegaard discusses in 'The Actual and Possible Theses by Lessing' in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (93-106). See G. E. Lessing, 'On the Proof of the Spirit and of the Power,' *Lessing's Theological Writings*, translated by Henry Chadwick (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), 53. Kierkegaard, too, makes the distinction between contingent truths and necessary truths. Both of them got the distinction from Leibniz. In his *New Essays on the Human Understanding*, Leibniz writes, 'the original proof of necessary truths comes from the understanding alone, and all the other truths come from experiences or from observations of the senses.' The distinction Leibniz is making is that between truths of reason (which are necessary) and truths of fact (which are contingent). In the *Monadology* (§ 33), he clarifies this difference by arguing that the opposite of necessary truths of reason is impossible, whereas the opposite of contingent truths is possible; that is, that which is contingent could have been otherwise. For helpful discussion of Lessing's reliance on Leibniz, see the 'Introduction' to *Lessing's Theological Writings*, 30. For an account of the relationship between Kierkegaard and Leibniz, see Ronald Grimsley, 'Kierkegaard and Leibniz,' *Journal of the History of Ideas* 26:3 (Jul-Sept. 1965), 383-396.

Kierkegaard's argument, then, is that natural causes and their effects are contingent and thus cannot be shown to be absolutely necessary. So, whereas what is absolutely necessary is absolutely different from contingency, natural necessity is not by definition at odds with contingency. How is something that is causally necessary contingent? To further elucidate my argument, let's look at the difference between absolute and causal necessity. Just as absolute impossibility and natural impossibility prove to be distinct, absolute necessity is different from natural necessity. Consider the following example: Let's say that in a fit of rage, a man throws his television out of the second story window of his home. We see it fall quickly toward the ground. And we expect it to do so. Indeed, it *will* fall to the ground provided there is nothing obstructing its fall as it speeds downwards. Given actual laws of nature, the television is, when let go, determined to fall. However, it is clear that it is not absolutely necessary that the television will fall; that is, it is *not* absolutely necessary that televisions, when thrown out second story windows, fall toward the ground. This is because laws of nature and the actual series of causes that lead to a television being thrown out of a window could have been different. So, while it is necessary that heavy things like televisions fall when dropped, it is only necessary given the laws of nature and the antecedent causal series leading to the event. But the laws of nature and the causal series are themselves contingent; the world and its laws, at its start, could have gone differently. Therefore, changes that are governed by laws of nature, while necessary, are not absolutely necessary.

This brief gloss on the difference between natural and absolute necessity is illuminating because it shows how the contingency of coming into existence is related to different forms of necessity. It is at first curious that Kierkegaard would say that both human choices and natural changes are free, when changes in nature are part of a causal chain. However, his claim becomes

less mysterious if we think of it as pitting the contingency of change against absolute necessity. Contingency excludes absolute necessity, not necessity as such. Therefore, changes, events, states of affairs, etc. can be necessary and also be contingent.

We see now that contingency and necessity as such do not exclude each other. How, though, is this related to free causality, or freedom in general? What does Kierkegaard's view of causation have to do with these conclusions I've drawn about the relationship between contingency and necessity?

It seems at first that even if, as I've shown, a series of necessary causes is contingent, their being contingent does not get Kierkegaard what he wants, namely, to show that all coming into existence is freely caused. Of course something being contingent is necessary for its being freely caused. If it could not be otherwise, if it neither may be nor may fail to be, then one cannot speak of an agent choosing it. However, not all contingent events are caused freely.

Let's say, to continue our example, that the man in a fit of rage freely threw his television out of his window. He is the free cause of its being thrown. This does not mean that he was the free cause of the television's *falling* to the ground. That is, even if he was the free cause with respect to throwing the television, this does not entail that he was the free cause of its falling downwards. Why not? We can imagine that, if the laws of nature had turned out differently, televisions and things of relatively similar weight when thrown out of windows fly at a horizontally straight line until obstructed by some object. In his fit of rage, the man can do nothing about where or how the television goes once it leaves his hand. The laws of nature are not up to him. Such things are, as Peter van Inwagen calls them, 'untouchable facts.' Van Inwagen elucidates untouchable facts in this way: '[n]o knowledge, and no fantastic stroke of luck, would render you able to do anything about the shape of the earth, the physical properties

of iron, the distant past, or the arithmetical properties of a number.’⁵⁸ Not only are absolutely necessary things untouchable (like the properties of numbers), but human agents cannot do anything about naturally necessary things (like the shape of the earth) as well. Consider, then, van Inwagen’s formal characterization of untouchability, that is, of that which we have no free causal power over: ‘x can’t do anything about y (and never could have), no matter what knowledge x might have had and no matter how lucky x might have been.’⁵⁹ Try as hard as he might, the man, even if he were a physicist and had adequate knowledge of such things, cannot freely make it so that the television falls speedily toward the ground once he decides to throw it.

It is clear, then, that even some contingent events are untouchable and so cannot be freely caused. What to make, then, of Kierkegaard’s insistence that necessary, and so untouchable, causes and their effects refer back to a free cause? Given the above analysis, it seems that Kierkegaard is committed to an apparent contradiction. He has claimed that *all* coming into existence refers to a freely acting cause, but that there are *some* changes of coming into existence (the intervening causes and their effects) that are necessary. While the series of cause and effect along with the laws of nature are not absolutely necessary, they are still necessary as my example of the falling television showed. It seems, then, that Kierkegaard, as with his insistence that the absolutely necessary is not possible, is making another drastic mistake.

But let’s see if sense can be made of what he’s here claiming. I propose that Kierkegaard is here making a distinction between an *absolute* and *ultimate* free source of the coming into existence of a series and the relative and necessary causes and events within that series. This is, no doubt, starting to look like cosmology, and it should, but it is not a cosmological argument, he’s not attempting a proof for God’s existence. But he is trying to give something like a proof

⁵⁸ Peter van Inwagen, *Metaphysics*, 3rd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2009) 260.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

for both why the world could not have come about necessarily, and for how the series of events in the world, regardless of their contingency, are nonetheless necessary.

Kierkegaard's picture appears to be this: every chain of events that comes into existence ultimately points to some intelligent and free cause that is not bound by any level of necessity to create. We could call this cause God, and, indeed, it would certainly be something like God that would have the kind of absolute, intelligent, and personal agency to freely bring about the kind of action Kierkegaard is here describing. Kierkegaard's Climacus, the pseudonym of *Philosophical Fragments*, does not call his free cause God, however, even though, as C. Stephen Evans has argued, the position drafted by Kierkegaard is congenial to a broadly theistic or Christian metaphysic.⁶⁰ I think we are entitled to, at least, envision Kierkegaard's first cause as some personal agent which may or may not have a personal investment in what it has made.

Kierkegaard, moreover, seems confident that no reference to laws of nature will dispel his thesis. 'As soon as coming into existence is definitively reflected upon, even an inference from natural law is not evidence of the necessity of any coming into existence.'⁶¹ Laws of nature of themselves do not explain the source of every chain of events. So, while laws of nature are applicable to explaining, say, the causal connection between events *within* nature (that A causes B, and B causes C), it, as Robert C. Roberts explains, only picks out the 'necessity of this or that event relative to other events inside nature.'⁶² The point is that laws of nature are explanatory of the *immanent* necessity of causes between events, and do not explain why the immanent chain of causes came into existence in the first place.

⁶⁰ *Passionate Reason*, 123-124.

⁶¹ *PF*, 75.

⁶² Robert C. Roberts, *Faith, Reason, and History: Rethinking Kierkegaard's Philosophical Fragments* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986) 106. Henceforth Roberts.

As Kierkegaard argues, each series of events points to a free cause. How so, if Kierkegaard is open to the possibility that any given event in a series is causally connected to an antecedent event in a necessary way? The clue to solving this dilemma can be found if we go back to his notion of possibility. For Kierkegaard, any series of events that *has become* actual is equally as possible as the, perhaps, infinitely large sum of series of events that are not actualized. So, Kierkegaard does not argue in favor of one possibility over another; each may be or may fail to be. By extension, *all* series of events, no matter how many, is also equally possible and, thus, equally actualizable. Roberts helps elucidate:

Even if we can explain the actualization of possibility *a* by reference to the actualizations of other possibilities (which are the causal antecedents to *a*) still this string of possibilities is only one among an indefinitely large set of strings. Even if we believe that there is no gratuitous fiddling with the string once it is initiated, still we can ask why this string, rather than any one of the others, got actualized.⁶³

To ask why this particular string and not another is to ask after what initiated the string of events (even if the events are bound by causal laws) in the first place. For Kierkegaard, when one definitively reflects on this movement, this initiation, then one will find that the string came into existence by means of a free cause, transcendent from the immanently causal nexus of the series. Why? Because if this possible string was not actualized freely, then it isn't clear why *this* string came into existence instead of another. Kierkegaard's point is that when we really think about it, we'll have to postulate the existence of some freely acting cause, since only this explains why the actual series of events has come into existence.

One will readily notice what this entails: the freely efficient cause to which every series of events points back to has multiple possibilities available to it to deliberate about and to actualize. Thus, as Robert C. Roberts argues, 'even if everything that happens within the creation

⁶³ Ibid.

happens by causal necessity, still every event is non-necessary [not absolutely necessary] in the sense that God could have actualized other creations—other chains of events—than the one he did actualize.’⁶⁴ Ultimately, Kierkegaard’s point piggybacks on an influential Leibnizian theme: God had available to him an infinite amount of possible worlds about which he deliberated and from which he *freely* brought into existence one of them. Thus, this world, and every chain of events that has come into existence subsequent to its inception, is not absolutely necessary.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS: COMPATIBILISM

In drawing to a close, allow me to briefly broach the promised topic of compatibilism in Kierkegaard’s thought. My discussion of Kierkegaard’s metaphysical foray into the nature of contingency, necessity, and causation suggests a compatibilism between human freedom and divine determinism. While he is a libertarian about human freedom with respect to causal necessity, there is a sense in which he may be read as compatibilist about human freedom and the role God plays in human life. The compatibilism I have in mind is suggested by my treatment of Kierkegaard’s understanding of the relationship between contingency and necessity, and his employment of Leibnizian-style possible worlds.

We’ve seen Kierkegaard argue that a necessary condition for a free action (in this case a change of coming into existence—a free transition from possibility to actuality) is contingency and that no changes of coming into existence are absolutely necessary. The freedom of an action rests on the real availability of at least two possible courses of action that may be or may fail to be actual. This, I believe, makes sense of Kierkegaard’s understanding of *kinēsis* to include both the change of the coming into existence of the world (and the causal series of change that follows) and human choice. The initial coming into existence of the world and the series of

⁶⁴ Roberts, 107.

causes that follow are contingent because God had available many possible worlds to choose to actualize; they equally may have been or failed to be made actual. Likewise, human choice, as it mirrors divine choice, is grounded in a contingent state of affairs whereby the agent has available really possible courses of action from which to choose. Both cases—a contingent world and a contingent course of action—exclude absolute necessity.

However, as we've also seen, Kierkegaard does not appear to claim that contingency and necessity *as such* are incompatible. That is, while contingency and *absolute* necessity are incompatible, the scope of contingency is broad enough to include natural necessity and the overall series that God initiates. If this is correct, then one question that naturally follows is how *freedom* bears in relation to other forms of necessity.

On the one hand, Kierkegaard is often interpreted as a libertarian about human freedom, and in important respects this is true. In addition to absolute necessity, Kierkegaard thinks causal necessity of the physical sort is incompatible with freedom. It seems clear from many statements throughout his authorship that he does *not* think that a causal series of events is *itself* a sufficient condition for important ethical-religious decisions. The inwardness of ethical and religious choice is unique. The individual remains the subject of his or her choice. For example, in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* Kierkegaard states that the temporal passage of Christian history over two thousand years cannot determine a single individual to become a Christian. The individual who chooses to enter into Christianity, does so 'whether he has eighteen centuries for him or against him.'⁶⁵ That is, the series *itself* does *not* determine the change one undergoes when becoming a Christian. Often, then, proponents of the libertarian reading of Kierkegaard distinguish libertarian freedom from theories that ascribe *natural* necessity to the world. These theories say that the world is a closed and fully deterministic system of cause and effect. The

⁶⁵ *CUP*, 49.

hard determinism, then, that is thought to be the brunt of the Kierkegaardian critique is one that says that freedom is illusory because, really, *all* events and states of affairs are the consequents of antecedent events and states of affairs governed by natural laws. Our actions, under this view, are ‘necessitated outcomes of causal chains reaching back far beyond our births.’⁶⁶

While he is a libertarian about human freedom with respect to causal necessity, there is a sense in which he may be read as compatibilist about human freedom and God’s causal role in the world. Allow me, then, to draft the picture I have in mind based on the claims we’ve seen him make about contingency, necessity, and possible worlds. Human freedom is compatible with a causal series determined and initiated by free divine causal activity, a series (among many possible) that God foreknows prior to actualizing it. In saying that human freedom is compatible with some kind of determining divine act, I have a fairly standard view of determinism in mind.

Robert Kane succinctly outlines the standard view of determinism in this way:

An event (such as a choice or action) is *determined* when there are conditions obtaining earlier (such as the decrees of fate or the foreordaining acts of God or antecedent causes plus laws of nature) whose occurrence is a sufficient condition for the occurrence of the event. In other words, it *must* be the case that, *if* these earlier determining conditions obtain, then the determined event will occur.⁶⁷

According to Kane, an event is determined when some antecedent cause, act, or decree occurs *and* its occurrence *guarantees* the occurrence of some subsequent event, like a choice. So, if God chooses to realize possible world x, then *everything* contained in that world will come to fruition.

In the context of Kierkegaard’s thought, God plays a causal role in the single individual’s ethical-religious life, at least in the way God freely chooses to actualize a series of events of which the individual’s life is a part. God’s causal role is determining in the sense in which Kane delineates the idea of determinism. God’s choosing to actualize a known possible series of events

⁶⁶ Anthony Rudd, ‘Speculation and Despair: Metaphysical and Existential Perspectives on Freedom,’ in *Kierkegaard and Freedom*, ed. James Giles (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 29.

⁶⁷ Robert Kane, *A Contemporary Introduction to Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 5-6.

is a *sufficient condition* for an event within that series to occur.⁶⁸ Thus, a momentous human decision (say, the decision to become a Christian) will occur *on the condition* that God chooses to actualize the series in which that event is a part.⁶⁹

This does not mean that God is causing the momentous decision, nor does it entail that the decision is absolutely necessary. Rather, the momentous decision will happen on the condition that God chooses to actualize the world in which the decision is made. This does not contradict Kierkegaard's advisory that changes of coming into existence do not come about by way of necessity, since it seems clear that something being absolutely necessary excludes its being freely actualized. Rather, the foregoing outline suggests the necessity of the consequence that *if* God actualizes the world that contained the series of events that contains the decision, then the decision will occur.⁷⁰ As it has been defined, this is consistent with Kierkegaard's view of contingency.

⁶⁸ I believe this is a philosophical lesson that can be squeezed out of Kierkegaard's imperative to live like the lilies and the birds in *Judge for Yourself!* See Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination/Judge For Yourself!*, trans Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1990) 182-183.

⁶⁹ See *PF*, 75

⁷⁰ So, Kierkegaard properly distinguishes between the necessity of the *consequence* and the necessity of the *consequent*. He appears to think that it is true that (1) necessarily, if God knows at time t_1 that x will do y at time t_2 , then x will do y at time t_2 . However, it false that (2) if God knows at time t_1 that x will do y at time t_2 , then it is necessary that x will do y at time t_2 . (1) expresses the necessity of the consequence and is consistent with contingency. (2), which is an example of the necessity of the consequent, expresses absolute determinism. Another way to interpret (2) is that it says something *essential* about the subject of the consequent. For example, we could read it as saying that God knows at t_1 that x will do y at t_2 because doing y at t_2 is an essential property of x . This and the previous reading of (2) both make the consequent—' x will do y at t_2 '—absolutely necessary, and thus not contingent. For a helpful discussion of the difference between the necessity of the consequence and the necessity of the consequent and their relation to the topics of contingency and necessity, see Plantinga, 8-13 and his article 'On Ockham's Way Out,' *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader*, edited by James F. Sennett (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998) 258-292 (particularly, pp. 258-267).